

## CHAPTER 10

# Evanescence and Apocalypse

One of the principal characteristics of literature classified as baroque is the attention it pays to the transience of all earthly things. Wilhelm Friese (1968) confirms the importance of the theme for baroque writers, and notes its lengthy pre-history, dating back to the Old Testament phrase “*vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) that featured prominently in Christian medieval thought and writing. The futility and vanity of all earthly things inflect not only baroque spiritual verse, but also poetry not driven by a specifically religious agenda (Friese 1968, 153). Storstein and Sørensen agree that the vanity motif is central to the baroque (1999, 107), while Meid (1987, 172–173) argues that the *vanitas* theme in baroque poetry is a cultural inheritance from Graeco-Roman poetry and also reflects a mindset created by seventeenth-century social and intellectual instability.

In treating the theme of evanescence poets often regard the world as an illusion. Windfuhr (1966) identifies a baroque inflection to the question “What is this world?” The immediate poetic answers take the form of transience imagery. The world is like grass, ash, shadows, fog, rivers, an arrow, with several of these images deriving from the Bible, and all involving phenomena that change or disappear. Such is the case, for example, in “Die Welt,” a poem by C.H. von Hoffmannswaldau (1616–1679):

Was ist die Welt  
 und ihr berühmtes gläntzen?  
 Was ist die Welt und ihre gantze Pracht?  
 Ein schnöder Schein in kurtzgefasten Gräntzen  
 Ein schneller Blitz bey schwartzgewölckter Nacht [. . .].  
 (Schöne 1988, 251)

[What is the world  
 and its famous luster?  
 What is the world and all its pomp?  
 Just a shaft of light in narrow regions,  
 a dart of lightning on a dark night [. . .]].

The Swedish poet Johan Runius (1679–1713) poses the same question:

[. . .]  
 Hwad är werlden?  
 Bara flärden,  
 Wällust, ähra, rikedom,  
 Alt hwad wi här drömma om,  
 Wi ju sakna,  
 Då wi wakna  
 Ä wi nakna  
 Och wår pung är ganska tom.  
 (Friese 1968, 153)

[What is the world?  
 Just frivolity,  
 pleasure, honor, riches,  
 all that we dream about;  
 we always miss it  
 when we wake.  
 Ah! we are naked  
 and our purse is quite empty.]

In her “Om Verdens Vstadighed” [On the world’s instability] the Norwegian baroque poet Dorothe Engelbretsdatte (1634–1716)

compares the world to a beautiful but cunning woman who is not all that she seems (Engelbretsdatter 1955 I, 169ff.; Akslen 1997, 187ff.). A celebrated poem by Thomas Kingo (1634–1703) discusses transience; it begins “Far, Verden, far vel, Jeg keedis nu længer at være din Træl” [Go, world, farewell; I no longer wish to be your slave] (Kingo 1975, 3:214–218). Anders Bording (1619–1677) writes in similar fashion:

Hvad er all Verdsens Pract og Vælde  
Hvad er den arme Mammons Skat,  
Hvad kand den kaade Vellyst gielde?  
Det alt forsvinder jo saa brat,  
Det er en Drøm,  
en hastig Strøm,  
En Damp og Røg som ey bestaar,  
Men i et Øyeblik forgaar.  
(Bording 1984, 293)

[What is all the world's pomp and power,  
what is the pitiful Mammon's treasure,  
how can wanton lust profit?  
It all vanishes in a moment,  
it is a dream,  
a fast-flowing stream,  
vapor and smoke made of nothing,  
and disappears in the twinkling of an eye.]

The transience prominent in baroque writing represents not the personal vision of an individual poet but rather the spirit of the age.<sup>1</sup>

It also features prominently in post-Reformation Icelandic poetry. It has been pointed out that the poems about old age in Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson's *Vísnaþók* (1612) focus on transience, decay, and ephemeral happiness (Jón Torfason et al. 2000, xxi). In *Íslandslýsing* [A description of Iceland], probably written at the end of the sixteenth century, the author states that Icelanders

1. *Dansk litteraturhistorie* 3 1983, 132.

have “multas didacticas odas et diuina cantica pulcherrime” [many didactic poems and most beautiful sacred songs], among them “De uanitate mundi” [On worldly vanity] (Burg 1928, 87; Oddur Einarsson 1971, 159). Though this is a familiar theme in Icelandic literature, there has been little or no discussion of the poetry of evanescence as a distinct literary genre. Such pieces have been classified as satires on the shameful ways of the world (see, for example, Böðvar Guðmundsson 1993, 443). The Dutch scholar Ferdinand van Ingen (1966) has shown that *memento mori* verse, a traditional medieval literary genre, was widely popular in the seventeenth century, with descriptions of transience gradually emerging as the poems’ principal preoccupation and the genre’s most distinctive feature. Hallgrímur Pétursson certainly composed many pieces identifiable as poetry about evanescence.

Each literary genre has its own characteristic motifs, imagery, structure, and style, and these can be used to classify individual works. There are three distinctive elements in *memento mori* pieces: the ultimate worthlessness of all earthly things (*vanitas*), the unavoidable mortality of all humanity, and the crucial need for repentance. Certain images, comparisons, and figures of speech recur in such poems (van Ingen 1966, 196). Van Ingen regards any *memento mori* poem without a penitential exhortation as incomplete and notes that such pieces had proliferated by the end of the baroque period. He also observes that the genre had links with other familiar types of poetry such as doomsday pieces, eulogies, and *ars moriendi* and *consolatio mortis* texts (van Ingen 1966, 112). Noting that most scholarly discussion of these texts has focused on the fundamental pessimism of their vision, Van Ingen claims that such emphasis is misconceived; the imagery needs to be considered in its generic context. Thus, in their *memento mori* pieces poets present the most gruesome pictures of death precisely in order to promote the poem’s *sentens*, whereas the priorities of consolatory poems are quite different, with death depicted in terms of sleep, entry to heaven, and the gift of salvation that is worth more than life itself (van Ingen 1966, 331–332).

The work of van Ingen and others has confirmed that the structure and presentation of transience poetry are governed by well-defined rhetorical rules. The most common figures of speech

used are repetition of various kinds (notably *anaphora* and *epizeuxis*) in order to link parallel sentences. Address formulae and interjections are common, as they are in German penitential poems, with exclamations such as “ach, ach” or “ach, weh, weh” or “weh, o, weh!” (van Ingen 1966, 209). There is frequent use of rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and *accumulatio*, and we are reminded that in baroque poetry the manner in which ideas are expressed is as important as the ideas themselves. Van Ingen describes the style of transience poetry as marked by pathos, with heavily emotive vocabulary deployed in the hope of touching and influencing readers (van Ingen 1966, 182).

In his final chapter van Ingen argues that in terms of structure and themes there is little to choose between baroque *memento mori* poetry and that of earlier times. However, the genre underwent significant change during the baroque period. First, the depictions of transience gradually became the main focus of the poetry, with much less attention paid to repentance and living a better life. Second, vocabulary and presentation become more important than meaning, with style no longer merely the means to an end but an end in itself; puns become increasingly common as does the accumulation of imagery. Third, the poetic tone is melancholy rather than exhortatory, with gloom and grief prominent (van Ingen 1966, 347–349). Imagery of evanescence no longer prepares the way for a reasoned conclusion: it is now the poem’s main preoccupation. Such verse was a seventeenth-century invention and is seen by van Ingen as a final significant contribution to the historical development of the genre, with the style seen at its best in the works of Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664) (van Ingen 1966, 353).

In Gryphius’s sonnet “Vanitas, vanitatum, et omnia vanitas” transience is strikingly depicted:

Ich seh’ wohin ich seh / nur Eitelkeit auff Erden /  
Was dieser heute bawt / reist jener morgen ein /  
Wo jtz die Städte stehn so herrlich / hoch vnd fein /  
Da wird in kurtzem gehn ein Hirt mit seinen Herden:  
Was jtz so prächtig blüht / wird bald zutretten werden:  
Der jtz so pocht vnd trotzt / läst vbrig Asch vnd Bein /  
Nichts ist / daß auff der Welt könt vnvergänglich seyn /

Jtzt scheint des Glückes Sonn / bald donnerts mit beschwerden.  
 Der Thaten herrligkeit muß wie ein Traum vergehn:  
 Solt denn die Wasserblaß / der leichte Mensch bestehn  
 Ach! was ist alles diß / was wir vor köstlich achten!  
 Alß schlechte Nichtigkeit? als hew / staub / asch vnnd wind?  
 Als eine Wiesenblum / die man nicht widerfind.  
 Noch wil / was ewig ist / kein einig Mensch betrachten!  
 (Gryphius 1964, 1:7–8)

[Wherever I look I see only earthly vanity,  
 how what one builds today another tears down tomorrow;  
 where now cities stand so splendid, vast and fine,  
 soon a shepherd will walk with his sheep:  
 what now are flowers will soon be flattened under foot:  
 he who is high and mighty will leave but ash and bone,  
 nothing of this world is imperishable,  
 now good fortune's sun shines, soon troubles will thunder.  
 Great deeds must perish like a dream:  
 will the water blister—the brittle human being—then remain?  
 O! what is all this, how we pay for our pleasures!  
 Like wretched nothingness? Like hay, dust, ash, and wind?  
 Like a wild flower that will fade for ever.  
 Yet no one will give thought to the eternal!]

The poem presents simple but striking images: that which is built today will be torn down tomorrow; shepherds will graze their herds where glittering cities now stand; the sun of good fortune shines for the moment but soon thunder will sound, bringing misery in its wake; man is but a bubble, and everything that is valued proves to be mere dust and wind (Gryphius 1964, 1:8). Similar imagery can be found in a poem attributed to Stefán Ólafsson:

allt sem auðnan gaf  
 eins og ryk  
 augnablik  
 ókyrrt hjól  
 vindblásin bóla [. . .].  
 (Stefán Ólafsson 2:1886, 226)

[all that fortune gave  
 like a fleck of dust,  
 a flickering eye,  
 a whirring wheel,  
 a bubble blown on the wind [. . .]].

Transience is certainly a recurrent theme in the poetry of Hallgrímur Pétursson. Along with “Allt eins og blómstrið eina,” the poem “Allt heimsins glysið fordild fríð” [All the world’s finery is flashy vanity] is preserved in his autograph manuscript (JS 337 4to), following the *Passíusálmur* (*Ljóðmæli* 1:8–14). In this manuscript the poem has the title “Um heimsins lán” [On the world’s good fortune] whilst elsewhere it is called “Um lukkunnar óstöðugleika” [On fortune’s instability]. Its eight-line stanzas feature an *abababab* end rhyme scheme together with internal rhyme in the second foot of lines 1, 3, 5, 7 (“glysið,” “-slysið,” “fisið,” “blysið”). The first stanza is as follows:

Allt heimsins glysið fordild fríð  
 fegurðar þrjálg og skraut  
 fallvalt meinslysið fyrr og síð  
 flestöllum reynast hlaut  
 álíkt sem fisið í hvassri hríð  
 hverfur snarlega á braut  
 lukkunnar blysið litla tíð  
 logandi óvart þraut.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:11; modernized spelling)

[All the world’s finery [is] flashy vanity,  
 the fancies and fripperies of beauty,  
 a passing accident, sooner or later,  
 for all it will prove to be;  
 like a feather in a violent storm,  
 vanishes quickly;  
 fortune’s torch, for a short time  
 flaming, suddenly burns out].

Eleven of the poem’s twelve stanzas depict decay in various forms before the final verse urges readers to consider their own

souls. The penultimate verse notes that God should always be feared, but otherwise the poem has no religious content. The transience and futility of all things are presented through images and comparisons. All beauty is but gloss and glitter leading people astray, it is a feather blown away in a violent storm, a flaming torch suddenly extinguished, or it is fruit trees that blossom quickly and “blika bjart” [gleam brightly] but wither away by nightfall. The reader is reminded of how bodily health, prized by everyone, can quickly give way to terrible disease that “búk sterkum niður slær” [strikes down a sturdy trunk], and death’s pale, wound-sharp scythe mows down flowers that are bright and beautiful in the sun. Such is the “ótraust og fallvalt” [untrustworthy and unstable] (verse 4) life of man, which disappears like the wind, having been merely on loan for a period. The beauty and “frakt” [elegance] of the flesh are like an oak tree in full leaf that “lífið gleður til sanns” [surely gladdens life]; yet the same tree can suddenly disappear in a trice and be viewed in retrospect as mere vanity when man eventually lies dead, a pale and bloodless corpse. In verse 7 worldly goods may lift the spirits of the foolish for as long as such finery covers the body, but wealth is as transient as other human resources, and men often perish, both on land and sea. The poem then refers to the happiness to be found in life, through travel or by accumulating wealth, for example; yet such pleasures can disappear without warning: “eitt él, einn neisti, ein bylgja, einn blær / burtsneiddi allt það lán” [a sudden snow-storm, a spark, a wave, a gentle breeze / wiped out all their good fortune] (verse 7). Thus, though world may be mild in manner and “ásýndar þýð” [pleasing to the eye] the pleasures granted to man conceal the Cross of distress, with fortune compared to Judas’s kiss. Many have accumulated worldly power and honor but these all prove worthless in the face of death. Verse 10 poses the question, “Hvað er heims blómi og gjörvallt glys / sem girnist holdið á?” [What are all the flourishings and fripperies of the world / to which flesh aspires?], and the answer takes the form of a comparison: everything desirable in the world is like smoke, vanity, faded chaff, a leaf or straw in the wind, or a dangerous light or flare that can blind the unwary. The verse ends by declaring that avarice is the root of all evil and urging readers to fear God and beware. In the



final stanza people are warned against being seduced by the good things of this world and urged to remember that “egnd dauðans snara er við gátt” [death’s baited trap is at the door]. The final image is of life’s slippery way that suddenly comes to an end. All these comparisons are typical of *memento mori* poetry. The poem shows us how a baroque text constructs reality only in order to dismiss it scornfully as smoke and mirrors.

In Grímur Thomsen’s 1887–1890 *Sálmar og kvæði eptir Hallgrím Pétursson* [Hymns and poems by Hallgrímur Pétursson] edition, the poem “Mannsins stuttur er eg inni” [Man’s [life] is brief, I tell you] is listed under “Sálmar um fallveltu lífsins og dauðann” [Hymns about life’s transience and about death]. In manuscripts it can be found with titles such as “Um mannsins skammvinna líf” [On man’s brief life] and “Um mannsins fallvalta líf” [On man’s unstable life] (see *Ljóðmæli* 1:119–121). The poem certainly deals with the theme of transience, but it is not clear that it should be called a hymn. Its structure is clear, as each stanza concludes with similar vocabulary or a variation of the basic idea (*variatio*):

[. . .]  
lítið sálu líknar þinni  
þó liggi féð í kösunum.

[. . .]  
dauðinn gefur gaum að ekki  
þó góssið liggi í hrúgunum.

[. . .]  
lítið sálu grætta gleður  
þó gullið liggi í kistunum.  
(*Ljóðmæli* 1:120)

[little will it soothe your soul  
though money lies in boxes.

[. . .]  
death pays no heed  
though goods lie in heaps.

[. . .]

little it gladdens a sad soul  
though gold lies in chests.

The theme of the poem was all too familiar to mid seveneenth-century readers: human life is short, death is unavoidable, wealth saves no one in the end. The point is made through a series of comparisons: breath in the nostrils (that is, man's life) is short; the end of life is like a leaf falling from a tree or hay left out to dry; a bed of clay and not of feathers awaits mankind. The final verse works differently, in that the reader is urged not to rush off into the world in search of useless objects but rather to trust in Jesus Christ. Hallgrímur's poem thus has all the characteristics of an archetypal *memento mori* piece. It ends with words of Christian exhortation but features no prayer or any other element that might justify classifying it as a hymn.

In many manuscripts Hallgrímur's poem "Barnalund blind hrædd" [A blind, fearful child's mind] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:42–45) bears the title "Um misjafnt hamingjunnar lán" [On fortune's unequal bounty]. It describes the worthlessness of everything but offers no warnings about death and no exhortations to the spirit, and is thus a typical baroque *memento mori* piece. In three manuscripts the opening stanza, featuring a different meter from that found elsewhere in the poem, includes a warning:

Ungdómur heimskur  
æskutíminn gleymskur  
gleddu þig spart,  
illt kemur óvart.

Barnalund blind hrædd við brjóst nam móður kúra  
æskustund ómædd fyrir öngvu kann að stúra  
en það mund algædd er mannsins náttúra  
skammt mun til skúra.

(*Ljóðmæli* 1:44)

[Foolish adolescence,  
forgetful youth,

enjoy yourself carefully,  
evil comes without warning.

The child, fearful and blind, cuddles its mother's breast,  
nothing can depress tireless youth,  
but when man's nature is fully made,  
it is but a short time before showers.]

We have first the image of a child suckling at its mother's breast and expecting no ill. But as it matures trials await. Even though he or she may achieve distinction in some field of human activity it is not long before everything changes and "allt eftirlæti" [all favorite things] suddenly vanish. Accordingly, in verse 3 we have the image of a sea journey, during which high waves and squally weather destroy the ship's fine sails and the vessel capsizes. Weather dominates verse 4: the sun may shine brightly in the morning but later that same day terrible weather can leave its mark. The final verse provides a bleak conclusion: "hjólið lukku teina / fer braut ei beina" [fortune's spoked wheel / follows no straight path]. Such is the unstable and untrustworthy way of the world this side of the grave.

As Jakob Benediktsson has noted (1982, 177–180) this poem was written in Sapphic meter, a Greek measure whose subsequent popularity can be traced to Horace's poem *Integer vitae* (Lie 1967, 586). The 1589 *Sálmabók* includes two Icelandic versions of Latin Sapphic pieces, with the translator attempting to retain the metrical features (Páll E. Ólason 1924, 101 and 113). Other post-Reformation Icelandic hymns are also written in Sapphics, Danish poets attempt to compose in the same meter (see Arnholtz 1946), and in Germany Martin Opitz claims (in his book on poetics) that while it is possible to compose vernacular poetry in Sapphics care must be taken to ensure that the verse can be sung, perhaps with musical accompaniment, in the manner of Sappho herself: fair of face, with flowing hair, playing her lyre (Opitz 1991, 58–59). Attempts are then made to introduce Sapphics into German poetry, as in Johann Plavius's poem "Deutsches Sapphicum" (1630) and in a further piece ("Von Sapphischen Versen. Fast nach dem Griechischen der Edlen Poetin Sappho") composed in 1642 by Philipp von Zesen (1619–1689). Schottelius is another scholar of poetics to suggest

that Sapphic verse could be composed in German but he acknowledges that some efforts had proved unsuccessful. In the event, by the end of the seventeenth century German poets lost interest in this intellectual challenge (Meid 1986, 70).

In an autograph manuscript (AM 416 b 4to) of séra Jón Jónsson of Melar (1596–1663) there is an Icelandic poem in Sapphics that Jakob Benediktsson has shown to be a translation from Latin. However, the Latin text as it appears in the manuscript had never existed as such originally; instead it is made up of lines drawn from various parts of a chorus from Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes*. The date of this composite piece is uncertain (see Jakob Benediktsson 1982, 178).<sup>2</sup> As noted in chapter 9 Jón Jónsson and Hallgrímur were neighbors and acquaintances, and Jón wrote a preface to the *Passíusálmar*, no doubt at Hallgrímur's request.<sup>3</sup> Jakob Benediktsson has suggested that Jón may have been responsible for the translation, though it could have been the work of his father, séra Jón Þorsteinsson, to whom a hymn in the same meter has been attributed (Jakob Benediktsson 1982, 179). The Icelandic translation attempts to follow the features of Sapphic meter:

Enginn oftreysti auðnunnar hreysti,  
örvænti enginn, þó aumur sé lengi;  
sá í hefð setur, svipt henni getur,  
ef mjög þig metur.

[No one should over-trust fortune's favor,  
no one should lose hope, though long luckless;  
he who can lift up can also lower,  
if he loves you greatly.]

Jakob Benediktsson points out that Hallgrímur Pétursson and

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2. Such compositions drawn from classical poetry were common in the Middle Ages and were known as *centos* (Jakob Benediktsson 1982, 178).

3. He was a son of the poet Jón Þorsteinsson, pastor in the Vestmannaeyjar, who was killed during the so-called Turkish raid of 1623. Jón Þorsteinsson was the brother of the grandmother of Guðríður, Hallgrímur's wife. The wife of Jón the martyr, mother of Jón of Melar, was taken captive and never returned to Iceland. The family of Jón of Melar had the same experience as Hallgrímur's wife, which helped to forge close bonds of friendship between the families.

Stefán Ólafsson both employ a Sapphic variant that differs somewhat from that used by Jón of Melar, but it is difficult to determine which piece was composed first (see Jakob Benediktsson 1982, 179). Stefán knew the meter well, having already used it when composing a Latin poem.<sup>4</sup> Jakob identifies three features in the Sapphic variant used by Hallgrímur and Stefán. First, in older examples of the meter the line is divided into two with a word in the first half that rhymes (usually a half rhyme) with the final word of the line, whereas Stefán and Hallgrímur prefer a seven-line stanza with an *abababb* end rhyme pattern. Second, in the Sapphic variant the even lines usually have six syllables (three disyllabics); and third, both final syllables in the odd lines are usually stressed. These last two features accord better with the Latin in terms of rhythm and the number of syllables (Jakob Benediktsson 1982, 180). A fourth element, internal rhyme, should be added to this list of features, for in the first, third, and fifth lines the last syllable in the first foot (usually the third syllable but the fourth if shortened by apocope) always rhymes. Stefán Ólafsson's Sapphic works as follows:

Þökk sé þér góð gjörð  
guð vor faðir kærir  
sem sólar *her*, haf, jörð  
hefur skapt og nærir  
og lætur *hér* vorn vörð  
verða það sig bærir,  
sem hitt er ei hrærir.  
(Stefán Ólafsson 2:1886, 336–337)

[Thanks be given to you,  
beloved Father God,  
who abundant suns, sea, and earth  
has shaped and nourished,  
and provides here protection  
for that which varies,  
and that which changes not.]

4. Another instance of Sapphic meter in Icelandic poetry is the poem by Jón Hallgrímsson (ca. 1649–1693) written to honor Bishop Þórður Þorláksson when he was consecrated as bishop; see Sigurður Pétursson 1997, 213.

One of Hallgrímur's Sapphic poems begins "Svo sem gler" [Just as glass] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:161–166). It features varied use of dactylic and trochaic forms, an *abababb* end rhyme scheme, and internal rhymes in lines 1, 3, and 5:

Svo sem *gler*, sýnist *mér*,  
 sælan hál *veraldar*  
 hvíkul *hér*, hvað líst *þér*,  
 hvítt að ofan *faldar*,  
 undir *ber*, ef þú *sér*,  
 illsku brúnir *kaldar*  
 og táli *tjaldar*.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:164)

[Just like glass, it seems to me,  
 the slippery treasure of the world  
 is transient here; what say you?  
 White headdress above,  
 yet below, if you look,  
 cold brows of evil,  
 seductively false.]

This is a typical transience poem, discussing "veraldarinnar velsemd" [the blessings of the world], as the poem's title in one manuscript puts it. The world is personified as a woman: she is beautiful and gentle, but also slippery, unstable and cunning, with the white headdress on top concealing her icy and evil brows; and she is a deceitful maiden who lifts people up and then knocks them down without pity.<sup>5</sup> In verses 5 and 7 we find many familiar *vanitas* images: the blissful world is like a rented dwelling, a borrowed chair, a turning wheel, a leisurely stroll, smoke, clay, a wind-blown skeleton, and a bubble.<sup>6</sup> In verse 7 we find a common image in contemporary European poetry: the bright and beautiful body clothed in golden raiments that soon becomes a corpse rotting in the earth, "vesælt maðkafæði"

5. The same comparison can be found in *Passíusálmar*: "Ambátt með yggldu bragði er þessi veröld leið" [This wretched world is a slave girl with wrinkled face] (11, 12).

6. leiguból, lánsstoll, ókyrrt hjól, ragl og ról, reykur og svæla, moldarleir, vindblásin beinagrind, vatnsbóla.

[miserable food for maggots]. Then verse 8 offers a warning about death: the world is treacherous and before we know it the body is being carried cold into its coffin. The final two stanzas provide the necessary good counsel: strive for genuine achievements, follow good advice and prosper in spirit by humbly seeking out the Lord.

One of Hallgrímur's best-known poems about transience is probably "Sú er raun það sannast víða" [This is a truth tried and tested] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:158–160), with its refrain "Fölnar fold, fyrnist allt og mæðist, hold er mold hverju sem það klæðist" [the earth wilts, everything ages and grows weary, flesh is clay however it is clad]. The title in one manuscript is "Um fordildarinnar ásigkomulag" [On the condition of vanity]. The poem has nine four-line stanzas, each of which is augmented by the last two lines of the refrain, linked by rhyme to each verse's final line. The third stanza is representative:

Fordild öll hún flýr úr huga  
 þá feigðin mann vill yfirbuga,  
 lítið stakkar dökkvu duga  
 þá dauðinn inn að læðist.  
 Hold er mold  
 hverju sem það klæðist.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:160)

[All vanity deserts the mind  
 when death is soon to destroy you;  
 dark coats count for little  
 when death comes creeping in.  
 Flesh is clay,  
 however it is clad.]

The poem begins with a reference to "spakmæli lærðra lýða" [the proverbs of the learned]. Though the exact reference here is not clear, sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century poets modeled themselves on Roman satirical writers and often cited classical authors on ethical and aesthetic matters.

The poem talks about nakedness and helplessness at birth and death, but also about appearance, dress, and decoration during an individual's lifetime. At this period it was popular to make fun of

sartorial excess, as we see with Hans Willumsen Lauremberg (1590–1658), a German professor at Sorø Academy, who in 1652 published four comic poems (*Veer Schertz Gedichte*) that also appeared in Danish translation the same year. One piece talks about “Almodiske Klædedract” [modish fashion] (Lauremberg 1889, 26ff.), mocking new affectations in fashion, not least the bourgeois fad for dressing like aristocrats. Hallgrímur’s poem, however, is more a warning about death, a *memento mori*, than a genial squib, with each stanza juxtaposing splendid appearance with merciless death. When the time comes, it counts for nothing that the fashions are foreign, the boots spurs decorated, and the shirts soft and silky. Similar contrasts are highlighted in Gryphius’s poem “Gedancken Vber den Kirchhoff vnd Ruhestädte der Verstorbenen” [Thoughts on the graveyard and the resting-place of the departed] (Gryphius 3:1964, 13–14):

Was aber nutzt! ein Prächtg Kleid  
Mit göldnem Zierath reich durchstricket?  
Was ists / daß man mit reiner Seid‘  
Die in das Grab verweiste schmücket?  
Schaut / wie die Purpur sich entfärbt  
Wie eur lang Stückwerck bald vermodert /  
Wie schnell der zarte Flor verlodert  
Wie vieler Hände Fleiß verderbt!

[But what good is it! A splendid dress  
ornately interlaced with gilt decoration?  
Why should someone be with pure silk  
adorned, who is banished to the grave?  
See how the purple is discolored,  
how the long patchwork soon decays,  
how quickly the delicate weave unravels,  
how the work of many hands is corrupted!]

In the poem Hallgrímur uses the familiar image of worms feeding off buried corpses: “trúðu mér að minnkar maktin / af möðkunum þá snæðist” [believe me that might is diminished / with worms dining on it]. In the Gryphius poem mentioned earlier the image is even more gruesome:



Der Därmer Wust reist durch die Haut /  
 So von den Maden gantz durch bissen;  
 Ich schau die Därmer (ach mir graut!)  
 In Eiter / Blut vnd Wasser fliesen!  
 Das Fleisch / das nicht die Zeit verletzt  
 Wird vnter Schlangen=blauen Schimmel  
 Von vnersätlichem gewimmel  
 Vielfalter Würmer abgefretzt.]  
 (Gryphius 3:1964, 13)

[The belly worms journey through the skin,  
 as by the maggots it is bitten through;  
 I see the guts (O, how I shudder!)  
 in pus and blood and water flowing!  
 The flesh that time does not violate  
 will, under snake-blue soil  
 from an insatiable swarm,  
 many kinds of worm, be consumed.]

Ferdinand van Ingen (1966) argues that such depictions were intended to disgust the reader:

People reading these accounts would be tempted to look away and hold their noses. But that is just what poets wanted. They would pay any price: no means was too crude, no scene too gruesome. The baroque made use of everything, the living and the dead, interpreting them allegorically.<sup>7</sup>

The final stanza of Hallgrímur's poem is an incitement or warning for all Christians, who are told that "hinn fær gott er mæðist" [he benefits who grows weary], which may be taken to mean that for mankind greater benefit lies in misfortune than excess.

Hallgrímur writes about the nature of the world in a stanza

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7. Beim Lesen dieser Darstellungen ist man gleichsam versucht, den Blick abzuwenden und sich die Nase zuzuhalten. Aber das wollten die Dichter gerade erreichen! Um zu wirken um jeden Preis, war kein Mittel zu kraß, kein Ort zu garstig. Das Barock bediente sich aller Dinge, lebendiger wie lebloser, sie sinnbildlich auszudeuten (van Ingen 1966, 299).

that plays with the similarities between the Latin word “mundus,” which can be both a noun [world] and an adjective [clean] (Einar Sigurbjörnsson 2010). The stanza is primarily a warning but is also a depiction of transience. It is characteristic of the poetry of this period that the same notion (beware of the deceitful world) is expressed in three different ways in the first six lines, before death is set up as a contrast to the world:

Mundu þig, maður, fyrir mundo  
 því mundus prettar stundum,  
 mundu þig fyrir mundo  
 því mundus svik ber undir,  
 mundu að sjá við mundo  
 því mundus er hrekkjalundur,  
 mundu að komast frá mundo  
 mundus á dauðastundu.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:133–134)

[Remember, mankind, the world,  
 for the world deceives sometimes;  
 remember the world  
 for the world conceals its fraud;  
 remember to be wary of the world  
 because the world is a trickster;  
 remember to leave the world,  
 clean at the hour of your death.]

A poem in *vikivaki* [ring dance] measure that begins “Brögnum skal nú bjóða” [Now I will offer men [a poem]] is printed in Grímur Thomsen’s edition, in the section headed “Heimsádeilur” [Criticisms of the world] but in manuscripts has the title “Um veraldarinnar háttu” [On the ways of the world]. It features many characteristic transience themes, though there are no decisive indications of Hallgrímur’s authorship (on its authorship and textual transmission, see *Ljóðmæli* 1:46–49). The poem has eleven stanzas, with an introductory verse followed by a further seven describing the world, and ending with three verses of exhortation and prayer. The poem tells of a world in which many

rush around “með stærilætis æði” [behaving arrogantly], making fools of themselves with their wealth and power, oblivious that all such treasures can slip from their grasp in a heartbeat. The theme is presented through various images “öngvir um eilífð drottna / eikur háar brotna / sem tréð það lága og lotna / lík verða þau bæði” [No one rules for ever / lofty oaks break / like a low and stooping tree / both will become the same], and the comparison of mankind with a tree is very familiar. Many of these images are intended to highlight the instability of everything: “margur á tá sér tyllir / tæpt þó standi hér” [many stand on tip-toe, / scarce can stay upright]. The fifth verse mentions death, noting that here on earth everyone is just a visitor. The poem describes men who “búk af bjórnum ala / og bera vegleg klæði” [feed their belly with beer / and bear their fine clothing], and there is no particular criticism of this: it is just another example of the nature of a universally unstable world.

The poem “Fróður beiða mig réð maður” [A wise man asked me] is attributed to Hallgrímur Pétursson and should also be classified as a transience poem. It is allegory rooted in reality whose language and form derive from *rímur* and the *Edda* (see Margrét Eggertsdóttir 1996a, 107–108). The poem presents a description of nature, but from it we see clearly that for baroque writers nature normally symbolizes something beyond itself. In this instance the description reflects the beauty and decay of the forest and the destructive role of man. Everything is symbolic and the essence of the poem is that “líf með stríði á lausum þræði / leikur og öll þess blíða” [life by a loose thread / hangs and all its happiness] (*Ljóðmæli* 2:93). Hallgrímur appears to explain the poem directly in the final stanza by means of a comparison drawn from the poetic language of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*. The poem itself is “siglukarfi Hleiðólfs” [Hleiðólfr’s sailing basket = a boat] that the poet now wishes would disappear due to his dissatisfaction with it. He laments that his creative spirit has received a very meager portion of the mead of poetic inspiration; there is thus no solace to be had as the world decays and disappears, for the poet and his poem will go the same way.

Another of Hallgrímur’s transience pieces is “Um dómsdag og upprisú framliðinna” [On doomsday and the resurrection of the dead], whose opening line is “Gef eg mig allan á Guðs míns náb”

[I give myself in full to my God's grace] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:69–84).<sup>8</sup> It poses the rhetorical question “Æ, hvað er þetta auma líf?” [O, what is this wretched life?] (verse 5) and presents successive images of evanescence:

Allt eins og blómstrið gult og grænt,  
glóandi stendur fagurt og vænt,  
á augabragði er það þurrt,  
ber öngva kurt,  
fellur, visnar og fýkur á burt.  
(*Ljóðmæli* 1:75)

[Just as a flower, yellow and green,  
stands shining, fair, and bright;  
in an instant it is dry,  
has no sheen,  
falls, withers, and is blown away.]

The poem treats death, judgment, and the last day theologically and exhorts the reader to repent: “Ó, maður, maður, hugsa þig um meðan tíminn er” [O, man, man: think on, while there is time] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:80).

A good deal of poetry about apocalypse, the end of the world, and the last days was composed in Germany during the first years of the baroque period. The generation that lived through the Reformation did so in the belief that the end of the world was approaching; indeed, that its last days and hours were already upon them (van Ingen 1966, 112–113). Many believed that doomsday was as unavoidable as death. Among the German poets who composed in this genre were Simon Dach (1605–1659) and Andreas Gryphius (see, for example, his “Das letzte Gerichte,” in Gryphius 1964, 1:90), though interest declined significantly later in the baroque period (that is, by the end of the seventeenth century). In these poems it is often hard to distinguish between the fates of individuals and that

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8. Among the manuscript titles are “Dagleg umþenking mannsins fallvaltrar ævi, skjótrar burtfarar og eflausrar upprisú” [A daily meditation on man's transitory life, sudden departure and certain resurrection] and “Sálmur um fallvölt lukkukjör og lífdaga mannsins” [A hymn on man's transient fortune and life].

of the whole world—that is, between death and doomsday. Such poems focus especially on four elements: death, judgment, heaven, and hell (van Ingen 1966, 114).

The images of heaven and hell in Gryphius's verse are often dark and gloomy. Natural imagery is associated with dangers, destruction, and terror: thunder, storms, and surging seas. The prince of darkness holds everything in his deadly grip, accompanied by his ravens, bears, fearsome snakes, and dragons (Windfuhr 1966, 185). We find such images in Hallgrímur's poem that begins "Hverfa happs tímar" [Fortune's days disappear] (*Ljóðmæli* 1:107–110). Like other pieces discussed in this chapter, the poem is written in Sapphic measure. Each stanza has internal rhyme and there is additional complexity in the third verse, where the first, third, and fifth lines feature vertical internal rhyme ("grá," "flá," "þrá") alongside the end rhyme of the even-numbered lines ("háu," "smáu," "sáu"):

Ágirnd grá æddi  
yfir fjölin háu,  
ótrú flá flæddi  
á fróns hálsana smáu,  
þrjóska þrá þræddi,  
því nær blindir sáu  
þar leiðir lágu.  
(*Ljóðmæli* 1:109)

[Grey greed hurried  
over high fells,  
two-faced fraud  
flooded the lowland hills,  
stubborn desire followed;  
even the nearly blind saw  
where the lanes were leading.]

The proliferation of rhyming words creates an interesting sonic effect when the poem is recited. The poet's use of verbs is also noteworthy. There are six present indicative verbs in the opening stanza, the second verse contains three subjunctive verbs and

one indicative, whereas the third verse has five past indicatives, the fourth six present indicatives, and the final stanza is also dominated by the present tense. This conscious variation of verbs contributes significantly to the structure of each stanza and of the poem as a whole.

“Hverfa happs tímar” is a poem about the end of the world. After the description in the main part of the poem, the final two stanzas indicate that God can now be expected to intervene and make his final judgment. In two of the manuscripts the poem is entitled “Heimsósómi” [On worldly folly]. The poem may have had a literary model that might have helped us to understand it better. Its imagery is remarkable: fires burn and confuse men’s vision, people are bewildered by disasters all around them, punishment’s whip lashes them and in some way fulfills the prophecy. The next stanza requests that tears should flow steadily down people’s cheeks or that bodies should lie quietly in their graves. In verse 3 the three vices or sins are named as greed, unbelief, and obstinacy, all of which overwhelm the world, both high mountains and low hills. In verse 4 three metal objects are identified: the world’s bell, the valley clock, and stamped metal (which must mean coins or currency). Contrasts are highlighted: wisdom slumbers and authority lies insensate, while the world’s bell tolls and the valley clock chimes. The poem’s subject is the world and the symbols that can be decoded from nature and the environment. Everything points to the imminent end of the world. Man’s senses have become disoriented as heads spin and sight is distorted, yet even those almost blind can see what is happening (verse 3) while the wise sleep on. The poem concludes with the narrator refusing to continue: “frá ég sný, fjær fer / framar mér að nefna / rök rauna efna” [I turn away / and wish not to speak more / of these sad matters].

Though this is certainly a suitable *topos* in context, it may be that even as the world is depicted as a smoking ruin the poem itself is part of the debris. Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has argued that at the heart of the baroque text lies “die Ruine” or an allegorical representation of the world in ruins. And just as ruins bear witness to chaos, the passage of time, and the evanescence of matter, so allegory itself reflects a worldview that seeks

to dissolve thought and meaning. Beauty in itself is not a priority, for this allegory is beyond beauty: "Allegories are to the realm of thoughts what ruins are to the realm of things; hence the baroque cult of ruins."<sup>9</sup> Within this ideological system the world is not depicted in terms of steady progress towards a better future but rather as a history of decline and fall.

The same material is explored in "Hætta er stór í heimi" [Danger is dire in the world] but matters of faith are more in evidence (*Ljóðmæli* 1:111–116). Though the poem begins and ends in prayer, its main focus is on fraught and quarrelsome times. In some manuscripts the poem is entitled "Sálmur" [A hymn], "Um hættusemi þessa heims" [On the risks of this world], "Klögun yfir illsku þessa heims" [A complaint on the malice of this world], and "Um heimsins vont háttalag" [On the world's bad behavior]. As in "Hverfa happs tímar" (discussed above), we find images not of earthly transience but of the last days. The devil sets out his web of deceit for men and many are ensnared, with increased malice, endless wrath, and the last judgment imminent. In this poem the formal decoration is so prominent that the thematic substance is not always easy to follow. This is particularly true of the last part of each stanza. The first verse is as follows:

Hætta er stór í heimi,  
 hjálpi oss Drottinn kær,  
 frá Satans svikum geymi  
 svo ekki glötumst vær,  
 reynd blíða grand græði  
 greind lýða vandræði,  
 leynd víða landmæði  
 á loft sér aftur slær.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:114–115)

[Danger is dire in the world;  
 may the dear Lord deliver us,  
 save us from Satan's tricks

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9. Allegorien sind im Reiche der Gedanken was Ruinen im Reiche der Dinge. Daher denn der barocke Kultus der Ruine (Benjamin 1978, 155–156).

so that we are not lost;  
 may fast friendship heal harm,  
 familiar woes of folk;  
 secret land-weariness  
 strikes widely again.]

The first four lines have a simple *abab* rhyme scheme whereas lines 5–7 feature double internal half rhyme, either in the form of single stressed syllables (“reynd” / “grand”) or trochees (“blíða” / “græði”), with all syllables in those three lines also rhyming vertically (as it were), thereby making twelve rhyming elements in all. The final line of the stanza end-rhymes with the second and fourth lines and in addition the final lines of every verse feature internal half rhyme, as with “loft” / “aftur,” “síðar” / “Guð” / “hæð,” “komið” / “heiminn,” “verstu” / “ljóst,” “nauða” / “þjáðum / “lýð” (*Ljóðmæli* 1:115–116). Thus the poem’s prosody represents a sustained exercise in authorial ingenuity, and these rhyming experiments serve as an artistic diversion even though the subject matter of the poem could hardly be more serious.

The poem treats deceit, with men committed to evil deeds from their early days, while God looks on; he will settle matters with them later. Trust and faith are in decline and new deceptions are pursued. All such evils deserve divine punishment, but in the final stanza a period of repentance is requested, so that man can look to himself and escape God’s wrath. In baroque poetry the final prayer serves as a rhetorical *conclusio* (van Ingen 1966, 167), as in this instance:

eyð hættu, ráð réttu,  
 reiði sættu, hrjáð gleddu,  
 neyð bættu, náð settu  
 nauða þjáðum lýð.  
 (*Ljóðmæli* 1:116)

[remove danger, put things right,  
 wrath assuage, hurt lighten,  
 need remedy, rest grant  
 for the suffering people.]



We have discussed two poems about apocalypse by Hallgrímur, and also some of his most important pieces addressing the theme of transience. These last-named works should certainly be thought of in the same light as *memento mori* verse. Transience poems describe in some detail the worthlessness of all worldly things before presenting (sometimes only in the final stanza) a contrasting vision of the spiritual and incorruptible. These are baroque texts whose descriptions of material destruction move towards nothingness, and yet all of a sudden faith in an eternal and indestructible God finds expression in that darkness and emptiness, thus investing the overall vision with new meaning. Such a pattern reflects van Ingen's characterization of the same poetic genre in Germany, with its treatment of contrasting heavenly and earthly values, the eternal and the temporal, the unchanging and the corruptible. Yet these contrastive elements are rarely presented in equal proportion. In most poems pride of place is given to the former, with the spiritual dimension emerging right at the end (van Ingen 1966, 87). Hallgrímur's works fit this European pattern. The same is true of individual pictorial allegories typical of the genre. The poems feature a variety of meters, with Hallgrímur experimenting with Sapphics, one of the measures rediscovered and renewed by baroque poets (see Meid 1986, 68–70), and *vikivaki* meter. Generally these poems feature complex internal and end rhyme patterns. Classical rhetoric is deployed in moderation, with sparing use of *anaphora*, whereas *variatio* is quite common, with the same point illustrated by multiple images and variations. Examples include repetition (“eitt él, einn neisti, ein bylgja, einn blær” [one storm, one spark, one wave, one breeze]) and parallel sentences (“eyð hættu, ráð réttu, reiði sættu, hrjáð gleddu, neyð bættu, náð settu” [remove danger, put things right, calm anger, lighten hurt, remedy need, grant rest]). Exclamations are common in Hallgrímur's poems about transience and death, most often “ó, ó,” “ó vei” or “aví.” Hallgrímur's admonitory tone is stern and incisive and characterized by frequent and purposeful use of verbs.

The poetry of transience has much in common with sermon tradition, and many who composed such verse were also clerics, along with members of the laity such as Martin Opitz (see Opitz 1970, 81–82). Yet there are differences between poets and preachers, as the latter need to moderate their use of rhetorical figures and be

sensitive to the needs of their congregation when preparing their message. Poets, however, can give their artistic gifts full rein. In the seventeenth century they teach, preach, and exhort their readers and listeners to good works, clothing their thoughts in appropriately elegant and eloquent expression (van Ingen 1966, 198).

The poetry of transience is also closely linked to religious verse, but the subject matter itself, evanescence, finds expression in both religious and secular verse (see Friese 1968, 153). These very traditional tropes found new impetus in the realities of the baroque age. They echo seventeenth-century perceptions of the world as illusion and image, a shiny surface that deceives and disappears. We need to recognize this as an artistic perception appropriate to a particular literary genre. Other genres such as *consolatio* and “heimslystarvísur” [verses about worldly pleasure] generate very different perspectives, characterized by delight in and hunger for life, and expressed through very different kinds of imagery, often by the same poets. Transience as a subject for verse was fashionable, as was the use of pictorial comparisons and multiple rhetorical figures to articulate it. Hallgrímur’s poems on this topic reveal his ambition as a poet: themes of great interest to contemporary European poets, metrical variety and daring, innovation in rhetoric and rhyme. All of these elements help to make his poetry remarkably rich and complex.

As we have noted, the poems discussed in this chapter have traditionally been classified as secular satirical verse, whose origins can probably be traced back to “Heimsósómi” [On worldly folly] by a poet known as Skáld-Sveinn, about whom next to nothing is known (Hannes Pétursson 1973, 44; Böðvar Guðmundsson 1993, 437). As some of their titles suggest, the idea of worldly polemic had been associated with these pieces for centuries. “Heimsósómi” is preserved in two sixteenth-century manuscripts and printed in the 1612 *Vísnaþók* (see *Vísnaþók* 2000, 228–230; Jón Torfason et al. 2000, xxxiii; Vésteinn Ólason 1993, 373–376). The poem begins with an image of widespread instability, with the world turning and Fortune’s wheel spinning. Bad times, greed, warfare, and treachery are described at length. The poem includes a warning about death: “Það er og skjótt að skekinn mun vindur úr æðum” [Soon, too, will the wind be shaken from the arteries] (*Vísnaþók* 2000, 229),

and it ends by exhorting the reader to repent: “Tak þér vara því tími er aftur að venda” [Beware, for there is still time to turn back] (*Vísnaþók* 2000, 230). Guðrún Nordal has recently pointed out that poems of worldly immoderation should not be classified as secular verse,<sup>10</sup> because in the sixteenth century it was regarded as a branch of religious composition (Guðrún Nordal 2003, 133–138).

Skáld-Sveinn’s “Heimsósómi” is composed in a meter not found in older Icelandic verse, and scholars have discussed possible influence from early German poetry (Jón Torfason et al. 2000, xl). Though *vanitas*-motifs feature prominently, the poem is primarily a complaint. Reference is made to the contemporary situation, the “plága sem þýtur í vort land [plague that rages in our land] as reflected in greed, aggression, injustice, and violence. The poem draws on medieval tradition, as with the image of the turning globe, and classical figures of speech such as repetition and rhetorical questions, as with “Hvað mun veröldin vilja?” [Where is the world heading?] The difference between this work and Hallgrímur’s transience pieces lies mainly in the prominence given to comparison as a structural element. Comparisons, of course, were not unknown in early poems about worldly immoderation; see, for example, “Svo eru ágjörn augu / auðugs manns og brjóst / sem grimmt helvítis gin” [so the prying eyes / of a prosperous man and his heart / are like the horrendous jaws of hell] (*Vísnaþók* 2000, 229). Yet with Hallgrímur many more such comparisons compete for attention: “álíkt sem fsið” [like a feather], “sem aldinjurtir” [as an orchard fruit], “sem vindur burtu flýr” [as a wind blows away], “sem limið eikur laufgað” [as a leafy limb of an oak], “allt eins og reykur” [just like smoke], and so on (*Ljóðmæli* 1:11–12). Though the images in Skáld-Sveinn’s poem are not dissimilar, they are literal rather than symbolic:

Það er og skjótt að skekinn mun vindur úr æðum  
og nárinn kaldur numinn úr fögrum klæðum,  
valdi sviptur og veraldar öllum gæðum,  
veltur í gröfina áta ormum skæðum.  
(*Vísnaþók* 2000, 229)

10. As in the recent *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*; see Vésteinn Ólason 1993.

[Soon, too, will the wind be shaken from the veins  
and the corpse removed cold from its fine clothes,  
stripped of power and all secular goods,  
rolled into the grave, for greedy worms to eat.]

To some extent the subject matter resembles that of other literary genres. Here, for instance, is a depiction of evanescence, but that is not the main point of this poem; whereas in Hallgrímur's poems discussed above, transience is often depicted entirely through vivid pictorial comparisons. The next chapter will explore his satirical poetry, which also has much in common with Skáld-Sveinn's "Heimsósómi." The discussion seeks to help confirm that satirical writing had a role in three seventeenth-century literary genres: the poetry of transience, the poetry of apocalypse, and fully-fledged satirical verse itself.